

THERE WAS GOLD IN DUXBURY'S MUD FLATS



Above left, scallop fishermen bringing in the haul.

(The Clipper editor wrote the following article in 1954)

One day in December 1953 Captain Norman White of NYC beached his dory, and he and his son Joel tossed 8 bushels of scallops they had dug from the mud flats onto the big refrigerator truck waiting to take them to New Bedford. A few moments later the waterfront was crowded with parttime shellfishermen and their small boats. Among them were Bob and Danny White, 2 of Captain White's 4 rugged sons.

"You boys must be slipping," Shellfish Constable Henry McNeil said, "letting the old man beat you in."

McNeil was thinking of a previous day when Bob White put-putted out to the north end of Clark's Island, about 2 miles offshore, and returned exactly 55 minutes later with his quota of 4 bushels of bay scallops which the dealer from New Bedford checked carefully to make sure there were no mussels or too much seaweed mixed in. Bob's feat was eloquent proof of the sudden and joyful abundance of the prized bivalves that were within easy reach of a long-handled rake on over 300 acres of mud flats lining Duxbury harbor.

On this particular day the price of a bushel of scallops in shell was \$4.75, with higher prices in prospect because of the scarcity of scallops around the Cape, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Captain White and his sons, who are descended from sea captains, earned \$78 for their 16 bushels. At that rate they could earn \$513 a week on a 2- to 3-hour working day.

"It's like finding a lot of gold nuggets in one pile," Bob said one day when he dumped a rakeful of 65 scallops into a burlap bag on his boat.

The scallop rush was a Godsend for Duxbury, whose boom-bust economy is the despair of local merchants. Elden Wadsworth, also a sea captain descendant, and a distant relative of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, has many adjustments to make every fall when the summer population of 10 or 11 thousand dwindles to the year-round average of 4500. Elden is a successful painting contractor who has to lay off about a dozen men every year when cold weather sets in.

Things are tough for some tradesmen and workmen in the home town of Myles Standish and John Alden. Roger Cushing is an iceman who works a 3-day week during the winter. He spends other days digging clams or razor clams. This year he combines his ice route with scalloping, and most days he gets his 4-bushel quota which he sells at the water's edge for \$19.

Billy McNeil, the shellfish constable's brother, keeps half a dozen of his men busy during the summer, landscaping gardens, building blacktop driveways, pruning trees and trucking. He has to lay off men, too, during the winter, but this year they don't mind. They're making more money than ever scalloping. So is Billy McNeil. Wadsworth, McNeil and many other businessmen in America's first summer resort, as Duxbury proudly calls itself, didn't concern themselves with the annual business recession that becomes acute around the first of October.

The 6-month scallop season opened on Oct. 1, and word got around town that there was "sea gold" out on the flats by Clark's Island. This island is named for the first mate of the Mayflower, John Clark, who befriended the inexperienced Pilgrim settlers in

their first rugged winter in the New World. Now the mud flats were befriending many of the direct descendants of these very Pilgrims. Not that scallops were new to Duxbury. Maurice Chandler, who was 81 years old the day after Thanksgiving, remembers them in such abundance around 1901 and 1902 they were used as fertilizer on Duxbury's inland farms, and other oldtimers recall certain years when they went "guzzling." Guzzling is a Duxbury word that refers to scooping scallops from the mud flats of tidal inlets or guzzles. But few scallops had been found since the bitter cold winter of 1934-35 when children skated out to the main channel of Clark's Island. It was not until the 1953-54 season that the scallop population was startling. Francis Sargent, director of the State Division of Marine Fisheries, was impressed by the scallop phenomenon, which he ascribed to the progressive warming of the ocean water which brought the scallops above the Cape. A year later, in mid-November of 1954, Sargent told the Associated Press that it "was already the biggest catch of bay scallops ever known north of Cape Cod." Maurice Chandler, dean of Duxbury fisherman, agreed: "I never saw such a run of scallops in my days." Meanwhile, down in the Greater New Bedford area, including Dartmouth and Fairhaven, there was a sudden scallop famine.

"It's the worst season I've ever seen," a big seafood dealer in New Bedford said.

Nevertheless, the scallop fever rose slowly in Duxbury. In October of 1952 only 1605 bushels were taken. After all, there were plenty of scallops around Orleans and Chatham, as usual, hence there was no reason for believing that the Duxbury scallop would

challenge the established supremacy of the market. Duxbury gourmets had been familiar with "Cape" scallops for years, and Carl Santheson, proprietor of Duxbury's Snug Harbor Fish Market, had featured "Cape" scallops in his ad in the *Clipper*. Then it developed that the heavy set of scallops in Chatham and Orleans, on the south side of Cape Cod, was disappointing. The bivalves were too small to be successfully marketed, and since the shell-fishermen in Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and the Buzzards Bay areas were having the worst season in years, Duxbury awoke to find itself the scallop capital of New England.

Rush Begins

Cape and New Bedford dealers rushed into town to buy every bushel of scallops Duxbury could produce. By the end of November, Duxbury amateurs had earned \$40,000, which was 8 times the yield in New Bedford, and as weeks passed Duxbury's lead increased sharply. It was certain to be a \$100,000 bonanza at least. When the price rose to \$4.75 a bushel Maurice Chandler shook his head. "To think," he said, "that back in 1895 I sold 900 big lobsters it took me a week to trap for 6 cents each."

By mid-December over 12,000 bushels had netted Duxbury residents around \$50,000 in NEW money. And most of this money was going to the very persons who needed it.

"This beats raising chickens," a farmer said. "You don't have to coop up or feed scallops, and they sell for more money a pound. He was right. While chicken was selling for 40 cents a pound shucked scallops were going for \$1.25 a pound. And if you were as expert as young Joel White, Duxbury's champion, you could shuck out a bushel in 40 minutes."

Duxbury was completely unprepared for its sudden good fortune. Stores had vaguely heard of scallop rakes, but none had one, and an investigation revealed that there is no such thing as a standard scallop rake, any more than there is a standard big league baseball bat. Each community had its own peculiar way of capturing scallops, whether by dragging, dredging (pronounced "drudging" by old salts), scoop nets or rakes. Duxbury improvised its own rakes. They varied in length from 10 to 20 feet, with the prongs ranging from 7 or 8 inches to about 20. Hardware stores sold every last stone shovel, pitchfork and rake. Coke rakes, normally used to remove clinkers from furnaces, were easier to fashion into scallop snatchers than some of the others, but there was still the question of long handles. Finally, Ben Goodrich Jr., who sells building materials along with a good many other commodities, came up with the solution -- closet poles.

"I sold more closet poles in a week than I have in any 2 years," he said.

Dick Prince did a flourishing business at the Duxbury Garage making the rakes which he sold for 10 to 12 dollars. Vernon Stewart interrupted a repair job on the town's only steam-roller to make rakes when Prince found it hard to keep up with the demand.

All over town business boomed. "Things are usually so slow around here in the winter," said Jackson Kent, who owns a marine and appliance shop. "I am sometimes tempted to go to Florida during the lull. I would if I had the money." Never in an off season did Kent and other marine appliance stores have such a run

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on new and used boats and outboard motors, caulking cements and compounds, oars, oarlocks, anchors, lifejackets. It was the same story in other stores, with a heavy sale of hip boots, oilskins, heavy shirts and foul weather gear of every description. "Now, why didn't I have enough imagination to order more long underwear," Stan Roberts said. He advertised "Scallop Mittens" for \$1.89. One afternoon he closed his shop, as usual, while he went scalloping. A friend in a nearby boat called over to him.

"My wife tried to get me a pair of those mittens yesterday," he said. "but you were closed. Don't you want any more business?"

"What about you?" Roberts said. "I asked you a week ago to fix the leak on my porch. I would have called another carpenter, but they were all out scalloping."

Automobile mechanics, insurance agents, a lawyer, teachers, masons, realtors, airline pilots and one helicopter pilot who makes his living in off hours dusting cranberry bogs and spraying trees, joined the scallop fleet. 3 Duxbury policemen went out whenever their off-duty hours came at low tide. A few men, taking a chance of mortgaging their future, quit their regular jobs to earn twice as much money doing 3 times less work. Stan Roberts wasn't the only merchant in town who closed up during part of the day. Carl Santheson did likewise, putting a sign in his display window that read, "Open At High Tide."

Octogenarians, teenagers and several women who hired babysitters while they were away, got into the act. Small salaried workmen went out weekends and holidays. If you didn't have a boat one of your friends did, and if your boat had no outboard, there was always someone who would

tow you out to the flats and back. Overhead? All you needed was a \$2.50 commercial permit, 4 burlap bags, a rake and warm gear. George Rego from New Bedford had cash waiting for you the moment you came in with your take. One day, however, Rego ran out of money when 130 scallopers brought in 506 bushels worth \$2,381 and had to pass out IOUs. In his excitement he failed to load his 5-ton truck properly, and it upended on the way up the ramp. By this time the boys were used to emergencies. Albert Paulding, a trucker who had just come in with his daily quota, righted the vehicle with his truck and a rope and spent the rest of the day making a few more dollars sanding the town's snowy roads.

The scallop boom was felt in many ways. Foroneshut-in and for a few families it meant a new TV set. Billy Mosher, one of 4 brothers who cashed in on the bonanza, bought a 1955 Ford, and others who hadn't traded a car for years bought the latest models. Business debts, doctor and hospital bills that had been such a gnawing worry, were finally paid. A carpenter, after handing a doctor \$115 in cash, apologized for the long delay. "You know, Doc," he said, "you delivered my daughter just about 3 years ago, and it was just about the time the postman delivered your bill." Elden Wadsworth and Carl Santheson were paid bills over 3 years old.

Jim Starkweather and his wife Virginia, who goes scalloping with him, paid for a house lot, and Jim, who works as a carpenter for \$8 a day when he is not raking in sea gold on the mud flats, looked forward to building the house he has wanted for his family since he returned to Duxbury after World War II. The Starkweathers can get along comfortably without scalloping, but the scallops make things more comfortable.

In Duxbury fewer off-season workers applied for Social Security checks. In a limited number of cases, it took persons off the welfare roll. Money derived from the sale of commercial permits raised the shellfish constable's salary, which is eked out with income from other jobs. Henry McNeil, a former professional lightweight boxer, is the town's burial agent, veterans' agent and director of veterans' services, a member of the police and fire departments and chief registrar for the draft.

He "walked" his boat in a 16-foot Amesbury boat loaned by the State division of marine fisheries to make sure all diggers are licensed Duxbury residents, maintaining law and order in a bay that was called "Thievish Harbor" by fishermen before the Pilgrims landed, as a result of a dispute between Indians and European fishermen over a whale harpoon. McNeil is also on hand when the scallopers return, making sure no seedling scallops are taken, and enforcing other regulations. According to a regulation set by the Duxbury selectmen, scalloping is limited to the period between half an hour before sunrise and half an hour after sunset. Failure to comply with these rules have already cost a score of the part-time scallopers suspensions -- and money. Scallopers had to leave and return to the same point on the waterfront adjacent to DYC. McNeil, reputed to "have eyes in the back of his head," is soft spoken but firm, and his 3 colleagues on the police force know they would be the first to be suspended for any infractions.

One morning several persons narrowly escaped drowning when a squall hit a fleet of 70 small boats, swamping and capsizing some, sinking others. Captain Norman White and his rescue party aboard the yacht club launch hauled some of the men

out of the water, and they were joined by other larger boats who picked up several others. Philip Randall and the 2 Ivanoff brothers were taken ashore exhausted after clinging to their capsized boat for 3-quarters of an hour. Waiting on shore was Fire Chief Eben Briggs with first aid supplies, including oxygen and a bottle of blended whiskey. The whiskey, luckily, was all that was needed.

The boys were all out scalloping next day.

Some shellfishermen that squally Sunday courted disaster when they refused to dump their scallops over the side, even when their boat was in danger of being swamped. "It would be like throwing money over the side," one said. But Joseph DeLorenzo, a turkey grower, and his son, Joseph Jr., had no choice in the cold darkness of a Saturday afternoon in December. They lost 8 bushels when their lapstrake boat capsized. Richard Jones, who was in their wake, brought the men ashore.

Two days earlier Shellfish Constable McNeil caught up with 3 boys just in time as their tiny boat, weighted down with scallops, was shipping water. The oldest boy was 13.

Duxbury, which was American's No. 1 shipbuilding center in the last century, has a number of connoisseurs of the clam, quahog and oyster, but it boasts few scallop experts. Duxbury clams once vied with their Ipswich cousins on the North Shore in cookbook recipes, and Maurice Chandler recalls Duxbury oysters that were "as sweet as a Cotuit cull." The new Duxbury delicacy poses new problems even to a salt water town full of seafarers and experienced shellfishermen. Taking note of this, the Martha's Vineyard Gazette said during the early part of the Scallop Rush:

"Shellfishermen of Duxbury, unaccustomed to scalloping, are reported to know nothing of

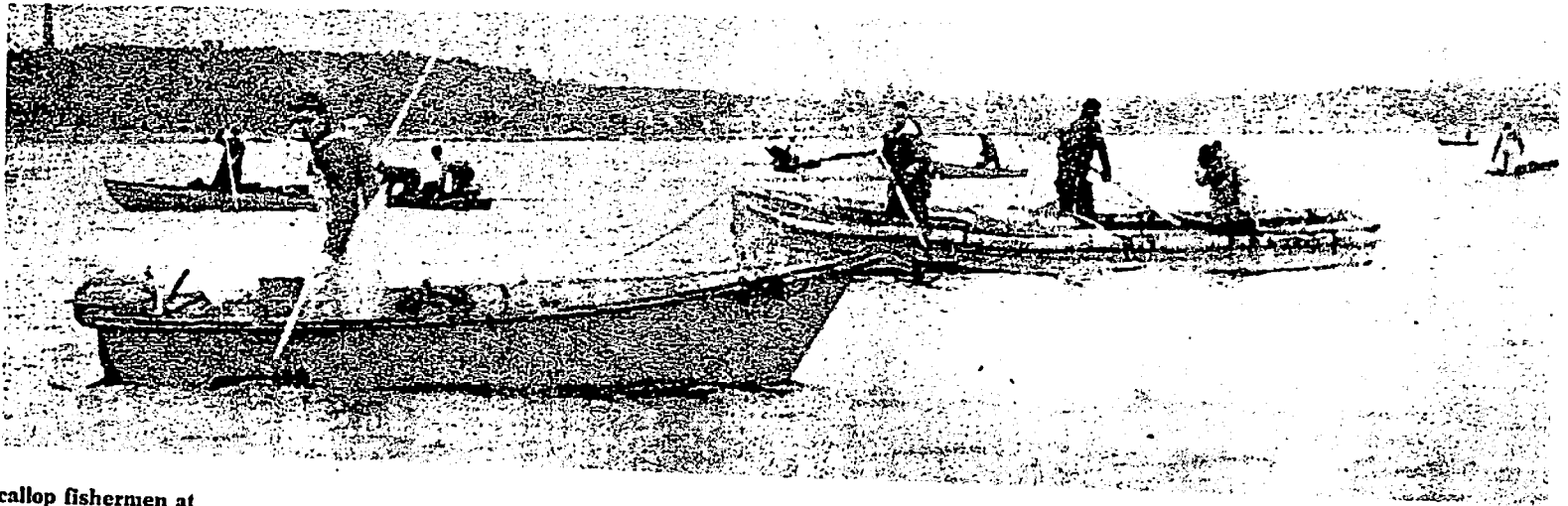
shucking the bivalves, and have simply refused to do it. They have been selling their catch in the shell. The Nov. 24, 1954 issue of the New Bedford Standard-Times surveyed the picture in Duxbury.

After noting that "It takes more than a bushel of scallops in the shell to make a gallon of shucked scallops, selling for \$8 to \$9," the article continues: "Since most of the scallopers in Duxbury never saw the bivalve in such commercial quantities before, they are being shipped to New Bedford to be shucked, a job requiring considerable skill." Skilled New Bedford shuckers are paid an average of \$1.25 a gallon. But Duxburyites are learning fast, and it is likely that increased profits will be realized in the future if the scallops continue to domicile in the waters of Duxbury Bay."

One Duxburyite who does his own shucking is Dan Winsor, proprietor of the Winsor House, a charming inn with the appointments of a refined English pub. Daniel is descended -- that's right from a long line of sea captains, some of whom brought cargo from China and the South Seas into Duxbury, sailing their square-riggers on voyages that took months. Dan rakes his own scallops, shucks them and serves them to his guests. From mud flats to dinner plate, a good example of vertical combination. The only middlemen involved are the cook and waitress.

How long will Duxbury be the scallop capital of New England? This will depend on many factors. "For one thing," said Elliot Holmes, shellfish constable in Duxbury until 1946, "anchor frost can kill them. If we have another severe winter like the one in 1934, we may have none next year." When the set is on shallow mud flats virtually exposed at low running tides, the young fry are particularly vulnerable to cold.

"The boom faded the next year."



Above right, scallop fishermen at work at Duxbury Bay.



Scalloppers load up small truck for short haul to top of landing to await buyer.